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SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE MAKING OF FINE CATALOGUES

WHY may not the catalogues of private art and other collections be allowed to be more universally available and useful? Does it necessarily follow, because a collection is privately owned, that its history must also remain private property? None will deny the collector's right to keep it so if he wishes but there are few collectors who accumulate their treasures with a desire to withhold from the public or especially from art lovers all opportunity of enjoying them. They loan their paintings and their porcelains to public exhibitions and even display them for weeks or months at a time in public museums. Yet when they issue their catalogues, they too often overlook the fact that the catalogue could and should be made the most lasting educational form their collections can take.

Why do they not issue, in addition to their magnificent, privately printed, limited editions, prepared for their own library and those of a few highly honored friends and perhaps for a public library or museum or two, a less elaborate reprint? This could easily be printed from the same type, on paper of lighter weight and with less liberal margins; and it would be a reprint that they could distribute, personally or through museums and libraries, to a far larger circle of lovers of art. It must be that they overlook the opportunity entirely. There is no other explanation of their failure to do this obviously possible and simple thing.

There can be no question about the great value such an edition of a private catalogue would have. Collections come and collections go, but a catalogue goes on forever, and if ably edited and carefully compiled it remains always an invaluable authority in its field. To be sure, the de luxe edition is not deprived of its authenticity by its elegant binding,

its ponderous paper and its expensive engravings, but in a large measure, it is deprived of its authority for the absurd reason that its very elegance and exclusiveness prohibit it from serving where it might otherwise be employed as an authority.

Certainly no mechanical obstacles stand in the way of a popularizing of the private catalogue. The printer, the binder, the paper maker and the illustrator are abundantly able to attend to that; while on the editorial side, the size of the finished volume has, of course, nothing whatever to do with it. Most private catalogues are ably and carefully edited, but not all. It is not the literary style that is sometimes at fault so much as the arrangement and the thoroughness of the complication. But fortunately there are extremely few catalogues so bad in their editing that the fact of their being "limited" is cause for congratulation. When thousands of dollars are spent on the paper, the cover, the type and the plates, there is likely to be no intentional parsimony in the estimate for editorial supervision. But even if the whole is no better than its poorest part, there is too much of value even there, for the work to be restricted by its sheer bulk in the use to which it might be put and the wider benefit that might be derived from it.

As an example of the superlatively exclusive catalogue which by its great bulk is far removed from the possibility of general use, there is that compiled by the late Heber R. Bishop to describe his famous collection of jades. This catalogue is in two volumes, each weighing about 75 pounds. The first volume entitled "Investigations and Studies in Jade," is 5½ inches thick and its outside measurement is 19 by 24½ inches. The second volume is not quite so thick but

sacrifices nothing in its other dimensions. Artistically, the books are magnificent. They are bound in full levant with heavy watered silk for cover lining and are printed on unusually heavy American hand-made paper. The illustrations are water colors, copper plates, lithographs and wood cuts. Only one hundred copies were issued, two for copyright and ninety-eight for presentation. After the printing, the type was distributed and all materials used in the preparation of the work were destroyed by direction of the executors of Mr. Bishop's estate.

Mr. Bishop's purpose in preparing so expensive a work and then limiting its distribution so strictly is explained in his own words in the preface where he "ventures to express a hope that it may be found to be of some value as a book of reference." He says further that the gift copies are intended to be distributed to all nations in order that, through their public libraries, the scholar and writer may find them available for reference.

His plan was to serve as a wholesale distributor of the vast fund of information which he had collected after years of research—not merely to perpetuate the fame of his own collection, but, more than that, to serve others who in turn would serve the general public. Was this purpose accomplished? In part, yes; but only in part. His collection was presented intact to the Metropolitan Museum and his catalogues are available for consultation in all the leading art centers of the world. But should a student desire to go through the collection with the catalogue and compare it, item by item, with the entries, could he take the 75 pound volume in hand and proceed to carry out his purpose? Hardly. He would have to trundle it from cabinet to cabinet in a wheelbarrow or shove it ahead on a table equipped with rollers. Here is an instance of luxury and expense defeating the very object they were intended to serve. For it is obvious how much finer, greater and even distinguished would be the direct result of Mr. Bishop's work and his limitless generosity if a less pretentious edition had been

issued before the valuable plates were destroyed. Why might they not have been reproduced in a less elaborate edition so that Mr. Bishop's own work might be available in a thousand public libraries or perhaps in five thousand, even though none of them were to find their way into private libraries? Mr. Bishop's theory is typical of that held a decade ago by all private collectors and still held by many. His work is indeed monumental. But as the volumes are difficult to handle and consult even in a library, it is not going too far to say that more than one librarian and more than one lover of fine books regard this catalogue that cost a fortune as a monumental failure—which, surely, is a great pity.

The most impressive feature of the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition in connection with the Hudson-Fulton celebration was its collection of paintings by Dutch masters of the 17th century. Other sections of the exhibition were given over to early American furniture, silver, pewter, glass and copper. The catalogue, like the exhibition itself, was in two sections. The first part was devoted to the collection of paintings, with an introduction by Dr. W. R. Valentiner and the second part, dealing with the other divisions, had an introduction by Henry W. Kent, a concise, comprehensive survey of the history of American furniture as a preliminary to the catalogue proper where there was a full description of each piece, a brief statement of its history when known, and the name of its owner. Each section of the catalogue became at once a veritable textbook of the subject treated, replete with information of interest not merely to those who were so fortunate as to see the exhibition, but equally to all others having interest in the subject. These catalogues serve as excellent examples of what any private collector of paintings or other art objects can do if he wishes to make his collection broadly instructive.

The late Mr. J. P. Morgan's privately printed catalogue of his famous collection of Chinese porcelains, which has

since been sold, was a conspicuous example of the really practical *de luxe* catalogue. It was reproduced as a small paper covered hand-book for the use of visitors at the Metropolitan Museum, where the collection was on exhibition. There were no cuts in the hand-book because the visitors had the actual objects before them. The purpose of this smaller volume as stated in its preface was to afford those interested in the subject of Chinese porcelains the opportunity to study the objects in the Morgan collection in the light of the latest knowledge to be had on the subject. The collection was described as succinctly and lucidly as appeared possible and without any technicalities that could be avoided, and the hand-book was made available to visitors by the aid of Dr. Stephen W. Bushell, the eminent Oriental scholar and sinologue, who revised for it the original catalogue which had been privately printed in a limited edition. There was an extensive historical introduction by Dr. Bushell following the preface by William M. Laffan, and the data were so clearly and carefully arranged that with this book alone any reader could acquire an eminently satisfactory understanding of this somewhat complicated but fascinating branch of Oriental art.

Even in the making of his privately printed catalogue, Mr. Morgan declined the opportunity to run heavily to pounds and cubic inches. The book was bound in morocco, measured 7 by 10½ inches, and was printed on heavy but not glossy paper. Its editorial arrangement was well-nigh perfect, with a complete system of cross references from cuts to text and with many fine illustrations in colors. If the book were placed on the market for sale it would easily be within the means of any collector, but perhaps not within the scope of the general public, for whom in turn the simpler

hand-book was provided. One is not a graduate of the University of Gottingen for nothing. Culture tells.

Among the finest of the conventional catalogues *de luxe* is that of the collection of the late Mr. P. A. B. Widener, in two parts, with a total of upwards of 300 pages. Bound in full morocco with gilt edges, printed on vellum and illustrated with fine photogravures, it is a worthy record of the wonderful collection he formed, and a book such as any private collector would wish to own for himself and give to his friends. Its edition was limited to 250 copies. Of course, ever since Mr. Widener's death, objects of great value—like the "Mazarin" tapestry and the Donatello sculptures—have been added to the collection; and, in time, a new catalogue will be required. What a boon if an edition within the means of every serious art lover could be issued!

The entire subject of cataloguing art collections is one which has come frequently to the attention of this magazine; and the foregoing observations have presented themselves in the natural course as the result of experience with all things that have to do with the editorial and mechanical branches of fine book making and illustrations. It is thought, also, that the production of fine catalogues, *de luxe*, or semi-popular, should not be confined to works of art and to books. Even a high-class kennel or stable could be described in a manner that would make it most interesting, and illustrated so as to show the beauty of its four-footed inmates in style most artistic. The same is true of a garden or greenhouse with a great variety of flowers, and notably of an orchid house. A pheasant run, a country estate—anything out of the ordinary—is worth a description, whether in a catalogue or a book. Often, in fact, the latter is to be preferred.